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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

FOR NEA, NEA/ELA, AND NEA/PI
TUNIS FOR MEPI (MULREAN)

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: BMENA: CIVIL SOCIETY PARTICIPANTS DISCUSS LACK OF
FOLLOW-UP; UNAWARE OF G8 ACTIVITIES

REF: 04 CAIRO 9249

Sensitive but unclassified. Please protect accordingly.

1. (U) This is a joint cable from Embassy Cairo and the
MEPI Regional Office in Tunis.

2. (SBU) Summary: During a recent meeting with Tunis MEPI
Regional Office Specialist Labidi, Egyptian participants in
last December's Civil Society Dialogue at the Forum for the
Future discussed their perception that there had been little
follow-up to the Dialogue. Despite attempts to communicate
with Arab governments, they have not had any feedback from
the GOE or others on the content of the Dialogue. They
argued that only continued pressure from the U.S. will force
the governments of the region to address reform issues
seriously. The activists were unaware of any planning for
the Bahrain Forum for the Future or for the meetings of the
Democracy Assistance Dialogue. They urged that a more
structured system for dealing with civil society be put in
place by the Bahrain Forum, since they fear that, once the
G-8 passes to the Russian Presidency, any hope of
institutionalizing a civil society role will disappear. End
summary.

No Civil Society Dialogue Follow-up on Arab Side

3. (SBU) Pol-Econ Specialist Wahid Labidi (Tunis MEPI
Regional Office) met with Bahey El-Din Hassan, Director of
the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS), Moataz
El-Fegiry (CIHRS), Dr. Gamal A. Gawad of Al-Ahram Center for
Political and Strategic Studies (ACPSS), and other Egyptian
civil society activists during a May 14-17 visit to Cairo.
The first two interlocutors participated in the Civil Society
Dialogue at the December 2004 Forum for the Future in Rabat,
with Bahey acting as the Dialogue's chairman (reftel). They
admitted that, while they had maintained contact with some of
the other Dialogue participants, they had not taken any
action on behalf of the Dialogue since December other than
distributing the Dialogue's declaration to Arab governments.
They had not had any other interaction with the GOE or other
Arab governments concerning the declaration or any other
Forum-related issue. Bahey said he was not surprised that
there had been no outreach by Arab governments to civil
society groups such as his own. Bahey asserted that was
further evidence that Arab governments were generally not
serious about reform. Only consistent pressure by the U.S.
will force the governments to look at such reform issues, he
said. (Note: In February, during the lead-up to the Arab
League Ministerial with the G-8--which had been planned for
early March and was then postponed indefinitely--the GOE had
reached out to several Cairo-based NGOs to solicit their
participation in the March meeting. The GOE did not seek
participation of civil society groups, such as CIHRS, whose
primary missions are human rights and democracy advocacy.
End note)

Unaware of Activity on G-8 Side

4. (SBU) Earlier this year, Bahey and other civil society
representatives met with a UK official (NFI) responsible for
the Forum for the Future and sent him a memo regarding
follow-up to Rabat. They never received a response, however,
and had the impression that the UK official was swamped with
other work. Likewise, they have heard nothing about
preparations for the November Forum in Bahrain, which they
hope will refer back to the Civil Society Dialogue
declaration from Rabat as a means of judging what has been
accomplished in the intervening period. The Egyptian
activists emphasized the Rabat declaration's call to define
better the role and mechanism for civil society participation
"as an equal partner" in the Forum for the Future. They
explained that Arab civil society activists were divided on
whether to embrace the Forum for the Future, with many
critics seeing it as either a whitewash for repressive Arab
regimes or a diversion from other key issues, such as Iraq

and Palestine. Those who agreed to participate need to demonstrate that there are concrete benefits, Bahey explained, such as a mechanism for ensuring that Arab governments are engaged in a real dialogue with civil society and are responsive to their demands. Further, the activists worried that, if such roles and mechanisms were not agreed upon during the UK's G8 presidency, there was little hope for positive developments under the subsequent Russian presidency.

15. (SBU) According to the Egyptian activists, determining a civil society role in the Forum for the Future requires defining who should participate. This should include civil society representatives from G8 countries, since their experience and stature would not only enhance the Civil Society Dialogue's performance, but might also make it harder for Arab governments to dismiss the Dialogue. They did not offer any suggestions for how to develop the right mix of participants, but noted that coordination and communication among civil society groups tended to be difficult. At the Rabat Forum, they called for the development of an "institutionalized" body that could represent civil society in the region. The Egyptian activists did not elaborate on how such a body might resolve the issue of participation.

16. (SBU) None of the Egyptian activists was aware of plans for the Democracy Assistance Dialogue (DAD). (Note: The DAD will bring together willing governments, civil society groups, and other organizations to improve and expand programs and projects that support the region's own efforts on democratization and public participation. Italy, Turkey, and Yemen will hold conferences on different themes in the coming year, with the first to be held in Istanbul at the end of June. End note.) They stated that they had assumed the DAD had never gotten off the ground and that this was a sign that the G8 was not serious about the whole BMENA process.

Comment: Need to Get the Word Out

17. (SBU) Our Egyptian interlocutors' remarks are, from what we can tell, representative of the lack of understanding within Arab civil society of the BMENA process. This is particularly troubling since two of the three Cairo interlocutors were part of the process in December. With less than six months before the Bahrain Forum for the Future, we need to get the word out about the BMENA and bilateral events that we and other G8 partners are undertaking to support the process, as well as our expectations for the Civil Society and Business Dialogues in November. End comment.

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